DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 175 012 CS 205 049

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TITLE Using In-Service Workshops to Explore Common Concerns.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 9p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (30th, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 5-7, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College High School Cooperation; *Composition (Literary); *English Instruction; Grammar; *Inservice Teacher Education; *Minimum Competency Testing; Secondary Education; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Many secondary school English teachers have had no formal training in the teaching of writing and consequently equate written discourse with language propriety. This has been aggravated by the back to basics movement that has influenced secondary teaching across the country--especially as it has led to the development of legislation establishing standards for minimum competence to be determined through testing. Two kinds of testing appear to be widespread: standard achievement tests and performance examinations that test a student's ability to perform a specific task. Few of these tests require a writing sample, assuming that a student who can pass an objective test on usage, grammar, spelling, and mechanics is a good writer. This assumption ignores numerous studies showing that the study of grammar has a negligible effect on writing ability. The university has a stake in the improved writing of secondary students and might provide inservice workshops to forge closer ties with secondary teachers. One model is the Bay Area Writing Project, an extended workshop that requires teachers themselves to engage in the writing process. An alternative is a two-day presemester institute with sessions on sentence combining, strategies of invention and evaluation, error remediation, professional literature, peer criticism, and curriculum planning. (TJ)

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Using In-Service Workshops to Explore Common Concerns

CCCC Annual Convention: April, 1979

Leonora Woodman

Recently, a student in my freshman composition course who had been asked to make substantial revisions in a paper that was relatively error-free but innocent of thematic focus, despairingly confessed that the concept of a controlling idea in w.tten discourse was entirely foreign to him. He had, he thought, been rigorously trained in composition, so much so that he had placed in the 90th percentile on a language achievement test taken in his senior year in high school. But, he observed with some acerbity, his proficiency in mechanics and grammar appeared to matter little to college instructors, who bedevilled him with such extraneous matters as rhetorical focus, coherence, logic, documentation, etc. and who suggested that these matters, rather than the conventions, were central to the composing process.

I begin with this anecdote because it illustrates a difficulty we face in our efforts to seek closer ties to our secondary colleagues, many of whom have had no formal training in the teaching of writing and who, consequently and in good faith, equate written discourse solely with language propriety. This mistaken perception has been aggravated by the so-called "back-to-basics" movement, spawned by sections of a public unhappy with the level of student competence in certain selected skills. As in all movements that express inchoate yearnings, this one remains ill-defined, but clearly its thrust is regressive, nostalgically urging a return to some kind of Golden Age that we supposedly once had but have since lost. In that prelapsarian paradise, it is assumed, authority was never suspect, children had a healthy respect for God and nation, and, above all, they could read, spell, and count, skills lamentably absent in our current crop of high school graduates.

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Now this movement has already deeply influenced secondary English programs across the nation in several ways. First and foremost, it has led to legislation in some 35 states establishing standards for minimum competence of students in secondary schools. A variety of reasons for this legislation havebeen suggested: declining test scores, complaints from colleges and employers, distrust of elective programs, a general conservatism, a demand for tighter controls of the schools. Whatever the cause, it would appear that such legislation is spreading. There has even been some call for national standards and tests. In my own state--Indiana--the effort to introduce a basic skills test as a condition of high school graduation proved abortive, but we now have a competence review mandated by the State Department of Public Instruction. I'll return to its specific features shortly.

Now the kinds of standards and competencies that have been legislated must give us pause. Two kinds of testing appear to be widespread: the standard achievement test, traditionally a fixture in the schools but now being administered more frequently; and a performance examination which tests students' ability to perform a specific task, such as balance a checkbook, or fill out an application, or read supermarket ads. The second is especially alarming, not only because it could lead to a proliferation of discrete tasks, but because it is unabashedly reductive, gearing the curriculum to specific consumer and job survival skills. What is even more alarming, and here I address the language achievement tests especially, is that minimum competency tests rarely require a writing sample, relying instead on the so-called objective measurement of usage, grammar, spelling, and mechanics. Those who can pass such tests satisfactorily are then endorsed as competent writers, a questionable assumption to say the least.

As we all know, tests are the tail that wags the dog. Teachers teach for the test and students learn for the test. And when achievement tests test student ability to parse a sentence or to observe the conventions or to spell correctly and do not test student ability to grasp an idea, and to elaborate it in a logical and conerent fashion, then teachers will teach test items and will not teach composition.

This state of affairs only increases an already dangerous neglect. Ten years ago, Squire and Applebee, in a report prepared for the NCTE, noted that the English programs in the 158 schools they surveyed--schools, by the way, selected for the supposed excellence of their English programs --devoted only 15% of class time to the teaching of composition and most of this consisted of after-the-fact attention to matters of grammar, mechanics, and usage. Today, although the time allotted to the teaching of composition has certainly increased in view of the cry for a return to fundamentals, the quality of instruction is basically the same; for the back-to-basics movement has revived the spurious assumption that the study of grammar and writing competence are synonymous, despite countless research studies indicating that the study of grammar has a negligible effect on writing ability. As a result, John Warriner's English Grammar and Composition is enjoying unprecedented popularity in the nation's secondary schools, in the mistaken assumption that language analysis is the same as language production.

The increased attention to mechanics again flies in the face of recent studies. For example, the October, 1975 report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress concluded, after comparing the essays of 13 and 17-year-olds to their counterparts four years earlier, that competence in mechanics had remained stable, whereas facility in coherence and sentence complexity had significantly detericrated.

According to this study, students were unable to fuse their perceptions into a consistent and logically connected whole, lapsing instead into the associational patterns and truncated sentences characteristic of desultory speech. Their failure, the study suggests, was not one of linguistic decorum but of thought, a far different matter from solecism and, to my mind, of greater concern.

Our experience in Indiana appears to confirm the nationwide trend to equate the teaching of writing with the teaching of editorial skills. I noted earlier that Indiana has not legislated statewide standards of minimum competence. Instead, it has left the matter to local option, that is, each school corporation, in conjunction with local advisory committees, is to determine the local standards of student performance. These standards are to be filed with the Indiana Department of Public Instruction as part of a new plan called Indiana Comprehensive Assessment and Program Planning System--CAPPS is the acronym--that requires each school corporation to submit a comprehensive plan of the goals and objectives of its curriculum and to evaluate student performance in these programs annually. The corporation is then required to submit a composite evaluation form for each subject area.

Now I have before me the Student Progress Evaluation Form for Composition (see attachment), which asks for information on the type of assessment instrument used to evaluate student performance. Of the eight listed, only one provides for an essay sample--it is called <u>student product</u>. The rest are concerned with one kind of objective test or another. There is little doubt that this kind of weighting has influenced assessment procedures. According to an English consultant for the Indiana Department of Public Instruction, those school corporations that have already submitted their programs in composition have for the most part opted for achievement tests as a means of gauging student performance. And predictably, their

program goals and objectives are in large part composed of discrete items that can be measured quantitatively.

It is well to note that objective tests are a relatively inexpensive and quick instrument of measurement. And I by no means wish to suggest that the editorial skills they measure are insignificant, if, indeed, we can be confident that students adept at discerning error in a finished piece of written discourse are equally adept at avoiding error in their own writing. What I do find disconcerting is the almost total reliance on such matters to the exclusion of the rhetoric of writing, by which I mean the discovery of a significant idea, its linguistic and rhetorical adaptation to audience, its architectural arrangement, its clarity of purpose,--the last anchored to the vital recognition that composition is by no means monolithic but requires a host of varying skills depending on the writer's rhetorical purpose. It is only when such matters are considered in the secondary classroom that the teaching of composition will shift from the analytic to the synthetic and will be accompanied by the recognition that the most reliable gauge of writing competence is the actual writing sample.

It is in this context that I want now to explore the use of in-service workshops to forge closer ties to our secondary colleagues. Here, the model that comes immediately to mind is the Bay Area Writing Project initiated in the summer of 1974 and now duplicated nationwide in similar institutes funded largely by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Of special merit in this program is that the secondary teachers who participated were not only introduced to recent developments in composition teaching but were themselves required to engage in the composing process. By common consent, this requirement was the most valuable, and I quote from one of the participants:

> Those of us who experienced that first summer program at Berkeley came away convinced that English teachers who want to teach writing must themselves write. Only when we ourselves have practiced writing along with reading about it--when we have agonized over the process as well as theorized about it--can we have the patience, persistence, and on-the-job inspiration to understand and use approaches that others have worked out. And only then can we begin to comprehend what it is like to be a kid faced with a blank piece of paper.[1]

My own experience with a two-week workshop in the teaching of composition that I conducted for New York City secondary teachers in the summer of 1978 confirms the need to include actual writing experience as the instructional core; indeed, to use it as a model that in its attention to strategies of invention, composing, and revision, parallels the instruction teachers might expect to transfer to their own classroom. This includes as well strategies of evaluation, for only as writers recognize from first-hand experience those comments that have proved useful in strengthening their own efforts will they readily master the art of instructional comment, a most difficult and delicate matter that our literature has not, unfortunately, adequately addressed.

The kind of workshop I have outlined is of course a rather ideal arrangement, suited more to a select few than to a broad audience. An alternative, and one that we at Purdue will initiate in the fall, is a two-day pre-semester institute designed both for our incoming teaching assistants and for our secondary colleagues, who will be invited without charge. The sessions we plan to offer will deal with sentence-combining, strategies of invention and evaluation, holistic scoring, error remediation, professional literature, peer criticism, and curriculum planning, the last

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[1] Shirley Boes Neill, "How to Improve Student Writing," American Education (October 1976), p. 7.

a rather crucial matter, since the concept of a sequential development of writing skills and tasks has traditionally been a vexing problem in the secondary schools. Through our High School Liaison Committee, a going concern that has sent Purdue faculty into the secondary schools for some five years, the workshops will be continued throughout the year, although necessarily restricted to a single aspect of the composition program.

If my sense of the professionalism of our secondary colleagues is accurate, our efforts at Purdue will be welcomed. Though many teachers in our area high schools continue to teach composition in the fashion I've outlined, many others feel uneasy and have expressed a need for in-service training that would introduce them to alternative strategies. The Indiana Department of Public Instruction is responding to this need with a proposed two-week workshop in composition designed to train composition resource leaders in individual schools. We in the Purdue English Department heartily endorse this move; more, we plan to supplement and reinforce it vigorously, because we recognize--perhaps somewhat belatedly--that the University has a vital stake in all literacy training.

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STUDENT PROGRESS EVALUAT'ON – COMPOSITION
Indiana Comprehensive Assessment and Program Planning System
Indiana Department of Public Instruction
Harold H. Negley, Superintendent

CAPPS – 2
9/78

DUE DATE:
July 1

LABEL
Retain this copy for your records

Questions regarding this report should be directed to:
317/927-0111.

A Student Progress Evaluation Report is to be completed in duplicate for each subject area. Upon completion retain the copy for your records and return the original to: Division of Educational Information and Research, Room 225, State House, Indianapolis, IN 46204.

SECTION I				
	Primary	Intermediate	Junior High	High School
Grade Tested (circle grade)	1 2 3	4 5 6	7 8	9 10 11 12
Month of Testing (use month number)				
Number of Children Tested				
Number of Children Excluded from Report (sec. C7,d)				
Type of Instrument Used (circle code as described below) (1) Published norm-referenced test (2) Published criterion-referenced test (3) Test commercially developed from selected objectives (4) Locally developed test	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
Other Assessment Measures Used (circle code as described below) (1) Systematic teacher observation (2) Student products (3) Skills checklist (4) Mastery tests (5) Other (specify) _____	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
Number of Students Meeting Local Standards				

SECTION II		
Will the test administered at the high school level be used as a requirement for graduation? ☐ Yes ☐ No		
Person completing this form:	Position:	Phone Number:

Attach a narrative analysis of your program evaluation in this analysis. Address the following questions:

(1) What procedures has your corporation used in establishing its standards?

(2) What are the standards?

(3) To what extent were the standards met?

(4) What were the constraints affecting the program?

(5) What is your corporation doing for students who fail to meet the standards?

(6) What were the unexpected outcomes of your program?

(7) What are the implications of the evaluation for next year's program?